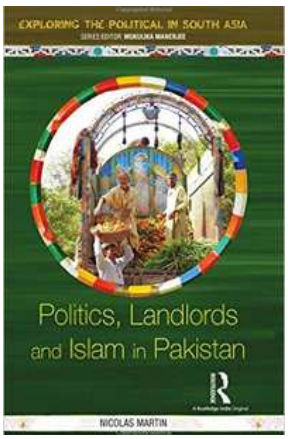
The art of subordination: landed elites, the state, and the circumvention of democracy in Pakistan

Geiser, Urs

The Art of Subordination: Landed Elites, the State, and the Circumvention of Democracy in Pakistan

Urs Geiser*
*Associate Senior Researcher, Department of Geography, Zurich University, geiser1950@gmail.com.

Martin, Nicolas (2016), *Politics, Landlords and Islam in Pakistan*, Exploring the Political in South Asia Series, Routledge, Abingdon, 192 pages, Rs 995.



In spite of enormous economic and political changes over the last decades, landed elites in Pakistan's northern Punjab continue to hold control over the rural masses. They can do this because they were able to benefit disproportionately from the modernisation of agriculture (for instance, through the green revolution) to strengthen their economic hold over the poor. They adapted to the democratisation of political processes (for instance, the holding of elections) by skilfully strengthening their control over the state apparatus and its service provision at the local level. As a result, the rural masses continue to depend on the landed elite for their livelihoods, including employment, and for access to state services. Helping the poor improve their livelihoods would thus require politicians and public servants who do not regard the state to be an "instrument for landlord domination" (p. 46), but who follow programmatic politics accountable to the people.

This, in short, is what I read as the core message of this thought-provoking book by Nicolas Martin. Its insights are based on his extended fieldwork in a village north of Lahore around 2005. The book, though, is not a classical "village study." Rather, the village provided the author "with a place to explore broader political issues" (p. 16). These broader issues include the persistence of inequality and the inability of "democracy" to break up the relations of dependencies that reproduce inequalities. To illustrate such broader issues, I refer to land reform, seen by many as an important component of re-arranging rural power relations. The details compiled in Table 1 illustrate that very little land was resumed under land reform laws. In addition, these figures and the official number of beneficiaries are contested. Some authors argue that while a small part of the resumed land was sold or distributed to tenants and small owners, a large part (especially from the 1959 reforms) was auctioned to rich farmers and members of the military and bureaucracy. On top of that, landlords distributed their land among family members to escape land reforms.

Table 1 *A quick glance at land reform in Pakistan*

	Authority	Planned ceilings	Outcomes
1945–55 (1)	First government committees on land and tenancy reforms		Nil
1959 (1)	Military regime under Ayub Khan	500 acres irrigated, 1000 acres un-irrigated (plus many possibilities for	1.02 million ha resumed

	Authority	Planned ceilings	Outcomes
		exceptions)	
1972 (1)	Under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto	150 acres irrigated, 300 acres un-irrigated	0.48 million ha resumed
1977 (1)	Under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto	100 acres irrigated, 200 acres un-irrigated	n.a.*
1990 (5)	Shariat Appellate Bench of the Supreme Court (during Benazir Bhutto's government)	Declared land reforms as being unconstitutional and against Islamic injunctions	Land reform process ended
Total	Total farm land (2000): approximately 50 million ha (2)		Resumed: 1.52 million ha, distributed: 1.31 million ha (4)***
	Total number of farms: 8.26 million (3)**		Persons benefitted: 0.26 million (4)

Notes: *Shortly after the parliament had passed this bill, Bhutto was ousted by General M. Zia-ul-Haq; **Details are: owners 6.74 million, owner-cum-tenants 0.6 million, tenants 0.92 million (source 2); *** These data refer to resumed land; at times, land owned by the state was released to landless people as well.
Sources: (1) Zaidi (2015) ; (2) Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2020) ; (3) Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2012b) ; (4) Table 72, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2012a) ; (5) Khan (2010) .

But Martin's concern with broader issues goes much beyond the issue of land reforms. I therefore discuss in the following sections the different building blocks of his argument, being aware that such a brief review cannot do proper justice to the author's differentiated and empirically substantiated writing.

Landed Elites: Adapting to Economic and Political Change

Classically, landlords derive their power from the control of land and labour. Workers depend on them for income opportunities through tenancy, sharecropping, or attached agricultural labour. Workers were dependent on the landowners' patronage for a place to build their huts or to receive credit in cases of emergencies. These relations often led to debt bondage. The onslaught of green revolution-induced economic modernisation and post-colonial democratisation was seen by some researchers and policy-makers as liberating the oppressed from these patron-client dependencies. Modernisation would provide alternative forms of employment (particularly through forward and backward linkages of agricultural production), and democracy would foster mechanisms of accountability (for example, by means of local governance). Nicolas Martin questions this thesis and shows how dependencies continue unabated, though in different form.

The modernisation of agriculture, for example, helped "middle peasants" join the ranks of landed elites by amassing land. Landed elites reduced their dependency on labour by means of the increased use of tractors and combine harvesters for the cultivation of wheat. In addition, many replaced wheat or cotton fields with orchards (especially citrus), which did not require sharecroppers, but seasonal wage labour. Many tenants were evicted, which further added to the creation of a "free" rural workforce that now depended on casual wage labour.

In principle, democratisation was expected to address such processes of economic change by forcing the state to strengthen its capacities to care for its citizens – providing education that equips one to find new employment, securing the rights of the workers under new labour market arrangements, providing homesteads, providing access to credit, and so on. But Martin shows how such expectations were blocked by the landed elite. They realised the crucial importance of controlling land and labour, while also investing heavily in ways to control the local state.

Using the example of the village he studied, Martin documents how traditional big landlords, having reduced the need to supervise labour, gradually moved to large cities to gain access to education for their children, and to search for close contacts to the corridors of state power. This allowed them to strategically position their closest kin in the state apparatus. In the village itself, the middle peasants gradually took their place, and they too invested in the urban education of their siblings. In addition, they used the platform of elections. The author meticulously followed the Union Council elections of 2005, documenting the ways in which the local masses were "bought," how opponents were harassed, how ballot boxes and votes were manipulated on the day of voting, and how campaign pledges dissolved.

In conceptualising elections, and politics for that matter, the author draws on Barth, and refers to the process as a "zero-sum game where one person's gain was another's loss" (p. 103). Thus, local elections became a battlefield between aspiring local elites. What is crucial to Martin is to show that this battlefield is heavily influenced by the direct involvement of higher levels of the state, especially the military. These are the levels that prevent real land reforms, that allow only certain people and not others to contest elections (for example, by means of corruption charges), and that allow ballot box rigging. It thus becomes essential for the landed elite to network with these higher echelons. These are costly investments, and the author sees parallels to India,

where research shows that the provision of "clientilistic goods" (p. 173) increases corruption. Martin's insights also throw new light on the assumed importance of *biradari* (larger networks of kinship) by showing that political networking involves only the closest kin, while further choices of alliances are based on purely instrumental and strategic decision-making beyond kinship.

Those who succeed in capturing the local state are rewarded by having an almost free hand for the "private appropriation of state resources" (p. 82). The elites capture the funds to build local health centres (which are built in poor quality and then used as chicken shacks), or schools (which either lack teachers or house employees of the elites). Beyond that, they capture contracts to build roads, control petrol stations, and so on.

The Poor: Perpetually Dependent, Though Differently

Nicolas Martin shows that forms of "traditional patronage" still exist (p. 51). Some people of the village are household or farm servants of the landed elite (both "old" landlords and "new" middle peasants), and few continue as tenants. The majority, though, have become wage workers and depend on casual work. In the village studied, alternative forms of employment were scarce, as urban centres were far away and too expensive for many labourers to stay. As a consequence, they "joined the ranks of the mass of unorganised and unprotected workers" (referring to Breman), a mass of free workers that now struggles to gain access to the limited and often seasonal opportunities of wage labour offered by the landed elites. This struggle for access made villagers spend "a great deal of time trying to ingratiate themselves with the landlords, and some even went to the extent of snitching on each other to gain their favour" (p. 90).

This helped to reinforce and reproduce elite power through "neo-bondage" (p. 63, following Breman). In addition, the elites continued practices of traditional patronage, for example, by lending money, especially to their servants, who more often than not fell into debt bondage. Many of the poor still depended on the elites for pieces of land on which to build their homes. The failure of the homestead reforms programme (launched by Z.A. Bhutto in the early 1970s), which was supposed to grant people legal ownership over their houses, is just another example of the landed elites' power to control the state's efforts to reach the grassroots.

The fear of eviction is a powerful device to enforce subordination, and so is the prevention of access to firewood or fodder. Other means to enforce subordination include muscle power and threats (many landlords employed gunmen), linked with a strong influence over local police and judiciary, which then become almost inaccessible to ordinary men and women. Threats are often targeted at the dependent's close kin, who then become unwilling accomplices in the subordination. Muscle power was strengthened through drug trafficking and the spread of arms as a consequence of the war in Afghanistan.

The prevention of education is another practice enforced by elites. They rarely intervene to rectify the widespread problem of teacher absenteeism. However, they support religious education of the conservative type, which tends to explain poverty in religious terms, encouraging the poor "to believe that worldly advancement would come to them from above rather than through their labour and joint political action" (p. 166). On top of that, imageries of tribe/caste differences continue to circulate, portraying the elites' position as one of strength and supported by religious favour, and the position of the poor as self-inflicted, the result of incapability, and of being bad Muslims. All these elite practices emerge from Martin's thick description of village politics – a description that can only have emerged from months of observations of social relations on the ground.

Searching for Ways Out of Inequality

The foregoing was my reading of this fascinating account of ground realities. Nicolas Martin's village study is a powerful documentation of actual everyday politics, and allows him to address, with empirically grounded evidence, issues in ongoing debates on the production, reproduction, and overcoming of inequality.

How far the insights gained in the case study village can be generalised across, say, northern Punjab, and Pakistan more generally is, of course, a recurrent question. The author hints already at the different political economies in southern Punjab and northern Sindh, where landowners' power still depends on more traditional patronage. We await other studies that will inquire into whether, in northern Punjab, dependent labour has easier access to alternative employment, which in turn may allow them to be less dependent on their village landed elites. Or comparative studies that examine whether such processes of becoming more assertive are co-opted by rival factions of landed elites. Such studies may provide different perspectives, without, however questioning the book's basic message of stark inequalities at the local level, the powerful role of (landed) elites, and the skills of these elites in adapting their strategies in order to reproduce their hold on power.

With these insights, Martin challenges (implicitly) all the policy-makers and practitioners who imagine rural Pakistan as inhabited by "local communities" of "small farmers," whose lives can

be improved through "community development" based on CBOs (community-based organisations) – a figment of the imagination that is specifically attractive to international development aid to this very day.

Martin explicitly challenges the explanation of the role of local elites as an expression of "political society" (as used in the work of Partha Chatterjee). Of course, there are a few at the grassroots who can benefit from the brokerage of state services by the local elites, and Martin writes that the

> lucky one on the "bright side" of political society . . . might obtain low ranking government jobs but did so in ways that undermined public service delivery . . . . In other words, the dark side of political society was far more significant than its bright side . . . . (p. 86)

Indeed, Martin shows convincingly that the masses continue to be captive to exploitative social relations, and that very little trickles down through the almost impermeable filter of the local elite. Therefore, in challenging established local social relations, "rights based movements and solid democratic institutions deserve more credit for the expansion of civil and social rights . . . than does political society . . . ." (p. 175).

But there is also a stark dilemma – that the sophisticated nexus of local elites and higher levels of state and political parties is

> forestalling the emergence of the large scale political movements, or even the rights based movements, that could have challenged the landed class and/or forced it to be accountable and to share more of the state resources that is appropriated for itself." (p. 91)

I consider it a strength of the book that it ends with this clear formulation of the contemporary dilemma characterising rural politics in this part of Pakistan (and most likely beyond), and that it does not enter into further "recommendations" – propositions such as the urgent need for horizontal class solidarity, or the need to increase working class mobilisation, or the need for community development. I argue so because such claims would just amount to ideological sloganeering that would be completely detached from the realm of the complex empirical so convincingly laid out in the book.

This does not, however, imply that the search to overcome the dilemma outlined at the end of the book should not be addressed. It needs to be addressed, so I argue, not through speculative sloganeering, but through critical research. Such research needs to focus, through a critical but ideologically "detached" approach, on concrete and everyday experiences with the opening or closing of windows for democratic empowerment. In his book, Nicolas Martin actually hints at entry points into such research. One is that the previous government of Asif Ali Zardari was the first in the history of Pakistan that was able to complete its full term; thus, for example: why was this possible? Another is that the media and civil society gained more room for critical expression under the same government. However, under the present regime of Imran Khan, these windows of opportunities are closing. Thus, for example: what are the very down-to-earth conditions that allow or prevent more critical engagement? What did media and civil society concretely do in practice to open windows of opportunities? In the surroundings of the village studied, Martin finds a few instances where basic health units and schools "worked well, thanks to the oversight of benevolent and paternalistic leaders." And he concludes:

> Further research would however be necessary to establish what type of leadership structures made it possible for leaders like these to resist close supporters trying to get them to subvert state institutions on their behalf. (p. 92)

Linked to that: Nicolas Martin's thick description of social relations at the village level highlights how the dependent rural masses are conditioned to search for improvements to their situation by struggling individually (for example, by seeking personal favours from their patrons) and not by horizontally aligning with their peers to question the power of the landed elite. At the same time, though, they describe these landlords as being "hard-hearted," exploitative, and bad Muslims (p. 163). Thus, for example, we may ask: What are the conditions under which the established common sense and its contradictions (with reference to the critical perception of the elites by the poor) may foster horizontal solidarity?

Indeed, Nicolas Martin's book is not only a thick description of real politics, but also serves as a trigger for new and profoundly "policy-relevant" research.

References

Khan, Shahid S. (2010), "Land Reforms – History, Legal challenges and How Shariat Courts Abolished Them," *Secular Pakistan,* September 23, available at https://secularpakistan.wordpress.com, viewed on May 14, 2020. ▲

Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2012a), *Agriculture Statistics of Pakistan 2010–11* , Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Statistics Division, Government of Pakistan, February, available at http://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/agriculture-statistics-pakistan-2010-11 , viewed in February, 2020. ▲

Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2012b), *Agricultural Census 2010, Pakistan Report*, Agricultural Census Organisation, Statistics Division, Government of Pakistan, April, available at http://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/aco/publications/agricultural_census2010/WRITE-UP%20AGRI.%20CENSUS%202010.pdf, viewed in February, 2020. ▲

Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2020), *Land Utilisation*, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan, available at http://www.pbs.gov.pk/content/land-utilization, viewed on February, 2020. ▲

Zaidi, S. Akbar (2015), *Issues in Pakistan's Economy: A Political Economy Perspective*, Third Edition, Oxford University Press, Karachi. ▲